Comparative study on WHO Western Pacific Region and World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies international standard terminologies on traditional medicine: Various Patterns Identification/Syndrome Differentiation (Part 1)

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The so-called “various patterns/syndromes” in the WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine in the Western Pacific Region[1] (abbreviated as the WPRO Standard) refer to the patterns or syndromes commonly encountered in different specialties or departments. In the International Standard Chinese-English Basic Nomenclature of Chinese Medicine compiled by World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies[2] (abbreviated as the WFCMS Standard), these patterns or syndromes are all included in the part of syndrome differentiation. The terms in this part are closely related to the differentiation of visceral patterns/syndromes. Thus, the translation of these terms is quite similar to that of the visceral patterns/syndromes.

The following is a brief discussion on the English translation and international standardization of these terms according to the studies made in the book entitled International Standardization of English Translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine: Study of Theory, Summarization of Practice and Exploration of Methods[3].

痛经不周证 pattern/syndrome of insecurity of thoroughfare and conception vessels: a pattern/syndrome marked by continuous dribbling of menstrual discharge and profuse uterine bleeding or threatened abortion.
In the term 冲任不固, the Chinese phrase 不固 means weakness. To render 不固 as “insecurity” sounds somewhat awkward because insecurity is often associated with the state of safety. However, in both of the international standards mentioned above, insecurity is used to translate 不固. In some Chinese-English dictionaries of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), 不固 is rendered as “unconsolidation”, obviously a literal translation.

冲任失调证 pattern/syndrome of disharmony of thoroughfare and conception vessels: a pattern/syndrome marked by cold and pain in the lower abdomen, dysmenorrhea or delayed periods and lower abdominal distention and pain.

In the term 冲任失调证, the Chinese phrase 失调 is usually translated as “dysfunction” or “disorder”. However, in both of the international standards mentioned above,失调 is translated as “disharmony”, sounding quite semantically equivalent to the original Chinese phrase.

寒凝胞宫证 pattern/syndrome of cold congealing in the uterus: pattern/syndrome of cold congealing in the uterus with dark menstrual discharge, white tongue coating and sunken tight pulse.

In the term 寒凝胞宫证, the Chinese character 凝 is often translated as “stagnation” in the current translation practice. However, the word stagnation is also frequently used to translate the Chinese character 滞 (slow in movement) or 凝 (cease to flow). In both of the international standards mentioned above, 凝 is rendered as “congealing”, making it possible to distinguish 凝 from 滞 and 滞.

瘀阻胞宫证 pattern/syndrome of (blood) stasis obstructing the uterus: a pattern/syndrome marked by stabbing pain in the lower abdomen, fixed in location and tender to touch, or accompanied by mass formation, or late periods with scanty discharge of dark purple blood and clots, or cessation of menstruation, or abnormal uterine bleeding, dark purple tongue or purple spots on the tongue, and string-like rough pulse.

In TCM, 痰阻胞宫证 also known as 痰瘀胞宫证 (pattern/syndrome due to retention of blood stasis in the uterine vessels), is a pattern/syndrome caused by retention of blood stasis in the uterus. In the WFCMS Standard[2], 痰阻胞宫证 is translated as “syndrome/pattern of static blood obstructing uterus”, quite similar to that in the WPRO Standard[1].

In the definition, the phrase “string-like rough pulse” may be the translation of the Chinese term 脉弦涩 which actually refers to two kinds of pulse, namely, 脉弦 which is often translated as “taut pulse” or “wiry pulse”, and 脉涩 which is usually translated as “unsmooth pulse”.

胞宫虚寒证 uterine deficiency cold pattern/syndrome: a pattern/syndrome attributed to deficiency of kidney yang that fails to warm the uterus, and manifested by aversion to cold with cold limbs, aching and coldness of the lumbar and knees, dull pain in the lower abdomen which could be alleviated by warmth and pressure, paled-colored and thin menstrual flow, or clear thin leukorrhea, or infertility, or abortion, accompanied by pale complexion, pale tongue with white coating and sunken weak pulse.

“Uterine deficiency cold pattern/syndrome” is a literal translation of the Chinese term 胞宫虚寒证. If changed into “pattern/syndrome of uterine deficiency cold”, it may appear more natural in structure and also keep a consistency with the translation of other similar terms. In the WFCMS
Standard[^2], this term is translated as “syndrome/pattern of deficiency-cold of uterus”, similar to that in the WPRO Standard. In the WFCMS Standard[^1], a hyphen is used to connect “deficiency” and “cold”. Such a way of translation is quite necessary because there is a special relationship between “deficiency” and “cold”. In the Chinese term 虚寒, the phrase 虚寒 literally means deficiency cold. However, such a translation often fails to reveal the actual implication of this term. According to the explanation made in A Concise Dictionary of TCM[^4], 虚寒 refers to a pattern/syndrome marked by deficiency of the healthy qi accompanied by internal cold (正气虚寒内寒), usually manifested as sallow and lusterless complexion, anorexia, drooling, aversion to cold, abdominal distending pain alleviated by warmth, thin leukorrhea, ache and heaviness of back and spine, profuse clear urine, sloppy stool, light-colored tongue with white coating and deep and slow and weak pulse. In the definition, the phrase “pale tongue” may refer to the Chinese term 舌淡 which means that the tongue is light-colored, not so serious as “pale”.

虚寒 is a pattern/syndrome caused by invasion and accumulation of dampness-heat in the uterus. If translated as “pattern/syndrome of uterine dampness-heat”, it may appear more natural in structure. In the definition, the phrase “slimy coating” may refer to the Chinese term 舌腻 which means that the tongue is greasy. Comparatively speaking, “slimy” sounds more accurate than “greasy” in revealing the implication of the original Chinese concept.

虚寒 is a pattern/syndrome of accumulated heat in the uterus: a pattern/syndrome marked by scorching pain in the lower abdomen, early periods and large amount of bright red menstrual discharge, or yellowish leukorrhea which is thick and fetid, reddened tongue with yellow coating and rapid pulse

The Chinese term 虚寒是 closely related to the idea 肾藏精, which literally means that the kidneys store essence or semen. The meaning of the Chinese character 肾 in 肾藏精 has two aspects, the substances for reproduction and the essence derived from the other viscera. If it refers to substances for reproduction, it is certainly related
to semen, but it of course not only refers to semen because such a function of the kidneys is not only found in men, but also in women. That may be why in the current translation practice, 肾藏精 is usually translated as “the kidneys store essence”. In view of such a fact, to translate 精室 as “essence chamber” seems better than “semen chamber”.

疾阻精室证 pattern/syndrome of phlegm obstructing the essence chamber: a pattern/syndrome marked by impotence, thin seminal fluid, lack of libido, obesity, lack of strength, pale tongue with white slimy coating and slippery pulse

In the Chinese term 疾阻精室证, the character 疾 is usually translated as “phlegm” or “sputum”. When to use “phlegm” or “sputum” to translate 疾 depends on the implied meaning in a given context. In TCM, the meaning of 疾 has two aspects, one is visible (有形之疾) and the other is invisible (无形之疾). The former refers to the sticky liquid excreted in the respiratory tract. In this context, 疾 can be translated as “sputum”. While the latter refers to pathological substance in the viscera that often causes pain, obstructive syndromes and epilepsy. In this context, 疾 is often rendered as “phlegm”.

疾阻精室证 pattern/syndrome of (blood) stasis obstructing the essence chamber: a pattern/syndrome marked by stabbing pain that refuses pressure in the perineal region with fixed location or mass formation or oligospermia and impotence or painful ejaculation or hematospermia

The term 疾阻精室证 is not included in the WFCMS Standard, but it is also included in some popularly used Chinese-English dictionaries of TCM. This pattern/syndrome is caused by retention of blood stasis in the essence chamber. That is why this term is sometimes simply translated as “syndrome/pattern of stasis in essence chamber” as in English Translation of Common Terms in Traditional Chinese Medicine[15]. However, comparatively speaking, translating this term as “pattern/syndrome of (blood) stasis obstructing the essence chamber” seems grammatically and syntactically better than “syndrome/pattern of stasis in essence chamber”.

风寒阻络证 pattern/syndrome of wind-cold obstructing the collaterals: a pattern/syndrome attributed to impeded blood flow in superficial meridians/branches and collaterals/networks by pathogenic cold, and manifested by aversion to cold, coldness, pain, contracture or numbness of limbs with dark purple or pale skin, pale tongue coating and string-like tight pulse

In the WFCMS Standard[12], 风寒阻络证 is translated as “syndrome/pattern of wind-cold attacking channel and collateral”. Since this term only describes the pattern/syndrome caused by wind-cold attacking or assailing the collaterals, not both the meridians/branches and collaterals, “channel” should not be deleted in the translation in the WPRO Standard. In TCM, the concepts of 表 and 攻 appear similar to each other in meaning, but actually differ subtly from each other. Literally 表 means to invade secretly while 攻 means to invade directly. Thus in the WPRO Standard[11], “assail” is used to translate 表 while “attack” is used to translate 攻. Such a differentiation is, of course, quite necessary and significant.

风寒阻络证 pattern/syndrome of wind-cold obstructing the collaterals: a pattern/syndrome attributed to impeded blood flow in superficial meridians/branches and collaterals/networks by pathogenic cold, and manifested by aversion to cold, coldness, pain, contracture or numbness of limbs with dark purple or pale skin, pale tongue coating and string-like tight pulse

The term 风寒阻络证 is not included in the WFCMS Standard. However, in other popularly used Chinese-English dictionaries, this term is included. For instance, in English Translation of Common Terms in Traditional Chinese Medicine[12], this term is translated as “syndrome/pattern of wind-cold obstruction of collaterals”. Objectively speaking, “pattern/syndrome of wind-cold obstructing the collaterals” seems better than “syndrome/pattern of wind-cold obstruction of collaterals” in revealing the meaning and maintaining the structure of the original term.
Wind-stopping syndrome pattern/syndrome of wind-prevailing migratory arthralgia: a pattern/syndrome attributed to stagnation of pathogenic wind-cold-dampness (with predominance of wind) in sinews, bones and joints, and manifested by wandering arthralgia with inhibited movement of the joint, thin white tongue coating and floating pulse.

In both of the international standards mentioned above, the translation of 风胜行痹证 is identical. To translate 行 in this term as “migratory” is certainly understandable. However, to translate 痹 as “arthralgia” not only appears too modern, but also sounds semantically inaccurate. In TCM,痹 has three aspects of meanings, either disease due to blockage of the extremities, meridians and viscera by pathogenic factors, or a pattern/syndrome marked by arthralgia, numbness and dyskinesia of the limbs due to invasion of pathogenic wind, cold and dampness, or a pathological condition caused by an obstruction of meridians[4]. The so-called 痹证 actually refers to a pattern/syndrome marked by arthralgia, numbness and dyskinesia of the limbs due to invasion of pathogenic wind, cold and dampness, usually translated as “block pattern/syndrome” or “obstruction pattern/syndrome”. Sometimes in order to avoid ambiguity, it is also transliterated as “bi pattern/syndrome”. As to “arthralgia”, it is just one of the clinical manifestations of痹证. Besides, 行 in 风胜行痹证 is also frequently translated as “wandering”.

寒胜痛痹证 pattern/syndrome of cold-prevailing agonizing arthralgia: a pattern/syndrome attributed to stagnation of pathogenic wind-cold-dampness (with predominance of cold) in sinews, bones and joints, and manifested by joint cold pain with fixed location, white tongue coating and string-like tight pulse, the same as the pattern/syndrome of cold-prevailing painful arthralgia.

The term 寒胜痛痹证 is caused by stagnation of pathogenic wind, cold and dampness in the sinews and articulus, in which cold is the major pathogenic factor. The translation of this term in both of the international standards mentioned above is exactly the same. As mentioned above, to translate 痹 as “arthralgia” is still in need of further consideration. In the current translation practice, the Chinese phrase 寒胜 in 寒胜痛痹证 is sometimes translated as “hyperactivity of cold” or “predominance of cold”. Comparatively speaking, translating it as “cold-prevailing” sounds more concise and accurate than “hyperactivity of cold” or “predominance of cold”.

湿胜着痹证 pattern/syndrome of dampness-prevailing fixed arthralgia: a pattern/syndrome attributed to stagnation of pathogenic wind-cold-dampness (with predominance of dampness) in sinews, bones and joints, and manifested by pain, feeling of heaviness and swelling in the joint with fixed location, local skin numbness, white slimy tongue coating, and slippery or soggy pulse.

In the term 湿胜着痹证, 着痹 is another name of 湿痹 which was first recorded in Zhang Zhong-jing’s Jingui YaoLu (Synopsis of Golden Chamber), referring to a pattern/syndrome caused by invasion of wind, cold and dampness (with predominance of dampness) into the limbs and meridians with the manifestations of heaviness of the limbs, obstructive numbness of skin and muscles or fixed pain of the limbs and joints that usually attacks in rainy days. In the definition, the expression “soggy pulse” seems to be the translation of the Chinese term 脉濡. Literally the Chinese character 濡 in 脉濡 means something like dampness or wetness. Actually, it just means the pulse is superficial, weak and small. This kind of pulse is easily to be felt when touched lightly but may disappear when pressed hard. In an ancient TCM classic entitled Mai Jing (Canon of Pulse), it said that “濡 means easy to feel the pulse which appears as light and floating as a sheet of silk in water”[4].

热邪阻痹证 pattern/syndrome of heat-obstructing arthralgia: a pattern/syndrome attributed to stagnation of pathogenic wind-dampness-heat (with predominance of heat) in sinews, bones and joints, and manifested by joint pain with local scorching hotness, redness and swelling, yellow tongue coating and rapid slippery pulse.

In the WFCMS Standard[2], 热邪阻痹证 is translated as “syndrome/pattern of heat obstruction arthralgia”, almost the same as that in the WPROM Standard. In 热邪阻痹证, the Chinese character 阻 is a verb which means obstruct, similar to the Chinese character 阻 which means block or obstruct. It is quite different from 痹 in the terms like 寒胜痛痹证 and 湿胜着痹证, in which 痹 is a noun. In 热邪阻痹证, 阻 just means block or obstruction. So the proper translation of this term may be “pattern/syndrome of pathogenic heat block and obstruction”.
REFERENCES

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WHO 西太区与世界中医药学会联合会中医名词术语国际标准比较研究: 各科辨证(一)

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